

Empower women for prosperity



THE panel that took part in the PNG womens forum in Port Moresby.

THE empowerment of women and girls is one of the most effective ways to achieve higher economic growth and better living standards among the millions of people in developing countries in our region.

As Australia's first female Foreign Minister, support for the empowerment of women and girls in our region, the Indian Ocean Asia Pacific, is one of my highest priorities.

This support will take many forms, from direct business assistance to higher standards of education, healthcare, and agricultural expertise.

Domestic violence is also a challenge confronting women in many communities which is not only a social issue, but an economic one. Role models encourage women and girls to aspire to leadership roles

THIS is part of a speech given by Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop on International Women's Day marked over the weekend

within their communities.

An example of an inspiring female leader in our region is Aung San Suu Kyi, who struggled through years of detention under a military regime in Burma.

Suu Kyi is a powerful advocate for freedom and democracy for the Burmese people and is a symbol of female leadership among her people and around the world. My meeting with Suu Kyi in 1995 was a life-changing experience for me and I know her struggle has inspired many others to strive for a better future for the country.

On International Women's Day we should take the opportunity to reflect on women's achievements and the challenges they continue

to face.

The Australian Government recognises the importance of empowering women and girls, accordingly more than \$2 billion of the foreign aid budget is spent on initiatives that have that as a principal or significant focus. It is not only smart economics but also the right thing to do.

One of our more innovative initiatives is the multi-donor Pacific Financial Inclusion Program which is helping to address a major barrier to women's economic empowerment by providing women in the Pacific with access to mobile money - a quick, low-cost way to transfer and receive funds.

In Vietnam, we will invest over

\$2 million in a new agricultural research partnership project to be delivered through the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research.

This program will support more than 2000 women from ethnic, minority and poor, smallholder farming families in Lao Cai province enabling them to increase vegetable production by around \$3.4 million annually.

In Papua New Guinea we are investing \$3 million in a new Family and Sexual Violence Case Management Centre at Lae. The Centre will provide women with access to medical, legal support, shelters and other services.

In Timor-Leste, Australia is funding the International Women's Development Agency to support women to develop micro-business-

es and savings clubs. Building the financial management capabilities of women in Timor-Leste is resulting in significant improvements in financial independence and leadership skills.

I have appointed Natasha Stott Despoja as Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls and in this role she has been engaging with women in our region to promote our foreign policy agenda including a focus on women's leadership, economic empowerment and addressing violence against women.

Natasha will be a powerful advocate in support of the rights of women in some of the most disadvantaged communities in our region. Empowering women and girls means that communities can reach their full potential. This means peace and prosperity for our region.

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